

The Bible Background of Evangelism

By ALVA J. McCLAIN

It may surprise the ordinary reader to learn that the English word "evangelism" does not occur once in the Authorized Version. And even its related term "evangelist" occurs but three times (Acts 21:28, Eph. 4:11, II Tim. 4:5). But these few passages do not convey a fraction of the large place given in the Word of God to the thing which we have named Evangelism. To discover this we must examine the Greek term.

The Word for Evangelism

It is a compound word made of "*eu*," meaning good or well, and "*angelos*," meaning messenger. In the New Testament the word occurs in three forms: (1) *euangelion*, which means "good news" and is uniformly translated "gospel"; (2) *euangelizo*, which means "to tell good news" and is generally translated "preach" or "preach the gospel"; (3) *euangelistes*, which means "one who tells good news" and is translated "evangelist." The close relation between these Greek words, which occur 130 times in the New Testament, would be more apparent to the English reader if they had been rendered respectively "*evangel*," "*evangelize*," and "*evangelist*."

An examination of the New Testament passages reveals that the work which we call "evangelism" arises directly out of the Christian "evangel" or Gospel. There were evangelists in the early church because there was an evangel to preach. The evangelists did not produce the evangel. The evangel produced the evangelists! Because this is so, all discussions of the work of Evangelism should begin with its message.

The Message of Evangelism

What is the Evangel or Gospel of New Testament Evangelism? It has at least three general characteristics: (1) the Gospel is a message of *Good News*, and therefore cannot be any mere system of law or ethics or social program; (2) the Gospel is good news *from God*, a divine revelation, not a human philosophy; (3) the Gospel is good news concerning *a person*, our Lord Jesus Christ, what He is, and what He did. More specifically, concerning the Incarnate Son of God who died for our sins and rose again from the dead (Rom. 1:1-3 and I Cor. 15:1-4); (4) the Gospel is the good news of *complete salvation in Christ by grace through faith* apart from all human works and righteousness (Rom. 4:3-5, Eph. 2:8-10, Rom. 11:6). Anything else, no matter how good it may appear, is not the Gospel that saves men from sin and its final doom.

The Work of Evangelism

Viewed from one standpoint God Himself is an Evangelist, for in the Scriptures we are told He preached beforehand the Gospel to Abraham (Gal. 3:8). And Christ was an Evangelist, for He came preaching the Evangel of the Kingdom. But the work of evangelism during the present age has been committed *wholly to men*. If you ask what men, the answer is found in Ephesians 4:11, 12, a very important passage on the subject of evangelism. It reads as follows in the American Revised Version:

"And he gave some to be apostles; and some, proph-

ets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the Body of Christ." The entire program of Christian Evangelism is here. Note several things:

1. These names in the passage describe *gifts* to the Church, not *offices* in the Church. What is the difference? The offices are elective, wholly within the power of the church to confer or to withhold; and there are but two, the Eldership and the Deaconate. The gifts are spiritual endowments, directly bestowed by a sovereign Christ. They may and should be recognized by the church, but cannot be conferred by any church. The church by election may create elders and deacons, but no church can make an evangelist or a pastor or teacher. Only God can do this.

2. Each one of the gifts mentioned in the Ephesians passage describes a *distinctive function* in the church. The apostles were eyewitnesses to the facts of the Gospel and founded the church. The apostles and prophets interpreted these facts under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, first orally, and finally in the New Testament writings. The evangelists spread the Good News contained in the New Testament, planting churches in new places. The pastors and teachers took over the new churches as shepherds of the flock.

3. *Not all these gifts were intended to be permanent.* Once the church was founded and equipped with the New Testament records, there was no further need of apostles and prophets. These gifts then passed away. The apostles have no successors. But the work of enlarging the church, of pastoring and teaching it, must go on. Hence, down through the centuries and now, we have the remaining gifts as a permanent possession.

4. The final purpose of these gifts is *to build up the Body of Christ through the ministry of its own membership*. Notice the language of the Revised Version. The pastors and teachers exist "for the perfecting of the saints." And this perfecting of the saints is "unto the work of ministering." And this work of ministering by the saints results in the "building up of the Body of Christ." God's purpose in giving evangelists and pastors and teachers to the church was not to build up a closed clerical order which would monopolize the ministry of soul-winning, but to exercise this ministry with and through a trained membership.

The Responsibility of Evangelism

Thus, I conclude, the responsibility of Evangelism rests upon every member of the church of God as a general duty. No one can escape it. But in a special sense this responsibility rests upon that select group of men who have in special measure the divine gift of evangelism. A study of the New Testament conveys the impression that the evangelist was an *itinerant*, going to new places, starting new churches. Once the church was started, the pastor was to teach the membership and work with and through them to extend the work of evangelism in that locality, while the evangelist moved on to a new place.

The modern church has departed from the program of

the Word in two serious respects: *First*, many pastors have failed to teach their people to become a self-propagating body. (Perhaps there are too many elected to the eldership who have not the divine gift of pastoring and teaching. Or, on the other hand, perhaps too many pastors fail because they are trying to teach their members to do something which they are not doing themselves. Laziness can destroy the value of the gift.) And this first blunder has led to the *second*: Because the average church has not become self-propagating, it has turned this task over to the evangelist, thus hindering his wider ministry of preaching in new places. And the evangelist, in turn, has too often become satisfied to confine his ministry to already existing churches, to the neglect of the unevangelized fields.

The Biblical Assumptions of Evangelism

Certain presuppositions stand behind all true New Testament evangelism. They may not be dealt with in any formal way, yet they are always present in the background. For lack of space these assumptions can only be stated briefly.

The first is the *reality of sin and its doom*. Tell me the attitude of a church toward sin and I will tell you its attitude toward evangelism. The cult of Eddyism, which denies the reality of sin, has lecturers, but no evangelists. And Modernism, which weakens the sense of sin, creates an atmosphere which stifles evangelism.

The second assumption is *salvation by free grace, the work of God, not men*. Since evangelism is the heralding of Good News, it cannot live in the dead sea of legalism. It is no good news to tell men they must save themselves. It is good news to know that the work is done. The preaching of law and commandments as a way of salvation may produce proselytes but not converts. It may change our opinions, but it will not change our hearts.

The third assumption of evangelism is *the fact of human responsibility*. Man is not responsible to save himself. He cannot save himself. But man is responsible for his *choices*. He is not required to climb the steep ascent to heaven, but he is responsible to choose the Way of Life when set before him. Wherever the sense of personal responsibility is dulled, whether by a hyper-Calvinistic theology or a mechanistic psychology, true evangelism ceases.

The fourth assumption is the *absolute lordship of Christ*. Before our Lord gave His great commission to evangelize the nations, He reminded the disciples that "all authority" was given Him both in heaven and on earth. If this be true, then every human soul must deal at last with Christ, either for salvation or for judgment. There is no other Saviour. There is no other Judge. This is what Paul had in mind when he wrote, "Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men." Again, if Christ has all authority, then He has the right to command *me* as a Christian, my life, my talent, my substance, in the work of evangelism. This is what Paul meant when he said, "Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel." This is the great imperative which is, and must continue to be, at the center of all the activities of Grace Theological Seminary and the churches which it serves.